

Excess

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‘Oh, that second bottle, Harry, is the sincerest, wisest, & most impartial downright friend we have, tells us truth of ourselves & forces us to speak truths of others, banishes flattery from our tongues and distrust from our hearts.’

*John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*¹

The history of wine-drinking is a history of excess. From Noah’s disastrous first experiments and the bacchanalia of the ancient Greeks to the spectacular over-indulgence described in the diaries of Evelyn Waugh, the consumption of wine to excess has been a recurrent theme among those drink and those who write about it. Sometimes the quantities consumed by the drinkers of the past are staggering. According to Roy Porter’s *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, ‘to gain a reputation as a blade one had to be at least a three-bottle man. Sheridan, Pitt the Younger, and the Greek scholar Porson were all said to be six-bottle men’.² One cannot help wondering whether they meant the same by ‘bottle’ as we do.

But what has excess got to do with fine wine? Fine wine is all about balance, elegance and restraint. As Roger Scruton argued in the last issue of *The World of Fine Wine*, the best wine should never be excessive, its beauty always consists in ‘the resolution and transcendence of contrasting qualities’. Likewise with the drinking of fine wine: it should be savoured, relished and admired, but never indulged in to excess. Those wine-lovers who objected to the six bankers who spent £44,000 on five bottles of wine in Gordon Ramsey’s Petrus in July 2001 were not purely motivated by envy; their objection was that the ‘Barclays Six’ had over-done it, they had gone too

¹ Quoted in *That Second Bottle: Essays on John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, edited by Nicholas Fisher, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000.

² Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books 1982.

far. So it might seem like a mistake even to associate the idea of vinous excess with the refinement of fine wine. Drinking to excess is one thing; the enjoyment of fine wine another.

But things cannot be as simple as this. Excess, or the tendency towards excess, has cohabited with the drinking of the finest wine throughout history. We find something similar in the relationship between great art and eroticism. Art historians have argued that we cannot ignore the erotic needs which inspired some of Titian's greatest paintings: they were painted in part for their ability to arouse and stimulate. Similarly, to understand properly the meaning of wine, we should not ignore its intoxicating qualities, and its tendency to give rise to excessive behaviour. The important thing is to understand the place of excess in our wine-drinking, not to dismiss it.

The issue here, of course, is the excessive consumption of *alcohol*. Excessive drinking of San Pellegrino or Ribena would be strange, but hardly worthy of serious discussion. And although alcohol is one of the main components of the taste of a wine, what we are concerned with here is not the *taste* of alcohol, but its psychological and physical *effects*. To see the importance of this, ask yourself the following question: would you enjoy fine wine in the way that you do, if it did not bring about the effects which drinking alcohol does? Imagine that wine tasted exactly the same as it does, even including the taste of alcohol, but that miraculously, it did not bring about any of the effects of drinking alcohol. Naturally, there is one effect of alcohol that none of us want: the hangover. So imagine instead that the choice you are being offered is between two wines, each of which tastes exactly the same, but only one of which has the characteristic effects of alcohol (minus the hangover). Which would you choose?

Surely most lovers of fine wine would choose the wine which got them – ever so slightly – drunk. If so, then they must accept that there is an essential connection between drinking even the finest wine and getting drunk. This might seem obvious. But it is striking how one can read an enormous amount about wine without a mention of the fact that this connection exists, that we drink wine in part for all the many pleasures it gives, including drunkenness. The truth is that the association of wine-drinking with ‘bacchanalia’ of various sorts is intrinsic; this is because drunkenness as a result of drinking wine is not just an unfortunate consequence of drinking but somehow integral to its meaning.

That there is a connection, then, between the desire to drink fine wine and the desire to get drunk cannot be denied. But what about getting drunk to excess? That seems like another matter. No-one would be as silly as to claim that the enjoyment of fine wine *must* go hand-in-hand with excessive drinking; this would be absurd. But nonetheless, the enjoyment of wine *can* involve a tendency towards excess, and this tendency can be part of that enjoyment. Who hasn’t found themselves in the position, enjoying good wine with friends, of wanting to continue, opening just one more bottle, the one they will regret the next day? These are the occasions when the pleasure of the moment takes us over, even though we know good taste and restraint should hold us back. For those of us who have some knowledge of our weaknesses, storing our best wine away from home is the only way to resist the regular slide into temptation.

The question, however, is not whether such lapses are always regretted, but whether they are always *regrettable*, and whether they should be avoided for other than financial reasons. The answer to this question depends on the right attitude towards drunkenness, and this is not a simple matter. Attitudes towards drunkenness in

western society have varied widely across time and changes in culture – Montaigne observed that ‘it is certain that antiquity did not strongly decry this vice’³ – and the contemporary attitude which sees a tendency towards drunkenness as something needing medical attention is a relatively recent phenomenon.⁴

Many western philosophers, by contrast, have praised drunkenness. Plato argued in his *Laws* that while wine should not be given to children, and that men under thirty may take wine in moderation, men over forty should get drunk ‘to renew their youth, and that, through forgetfulness of care, the temper of their souls may lose its hardness and become softer and more ductile’.⁵ Seneca thought that wine ‘frees the soul from the servitude of cares, releases it from slavery, quickens it, and makes it bolder for all undertakings’.⁶ The greatest philosopher of the modern era, Immanuel Kant, a man not generally known for his sensuality, believed that mild intoxication enhances communication and social pleasure: ‘we forget and overlook the weaknesses of others... people who are otherwise hard-hearted become, through intoxication, good-humoured, communicative and benign’.⁷

Not all defences of drunkenness have been so high-minded. Many writers have deceived themselves into thinking that drinking stimulates creativity. But of course it is not true, and this delusion plus the inevitable alcoholism which results turns these writers into the kind of self-pitying bore brilliantly parodied in the Coen

³ ‘On Drunkenness’ in Michel de Montaigne *The Complete Essays* edited and translated by M.A. Screech, Hardmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books 1991.

⁴ See Marty Roth, ‘The Golden Age of Drinking and the Fall into Addiction’ *Janus Head*, 7(1), 11-33.

⁵ Plato, *Laws* (666b), translated by Trevor J. Saunders, Hardmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books 1970.

⁶ Seneca, ‘On Tranquillity of Mind’ in *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca*, translated by Moses Hadas, New York: Doubleday 1958.

⁷ ‘Kant on the metaphysics of morals: Vigilantius’s lectures notes’ pp. 373-374, in *Lectures on Ethics* translated by P. Heath, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997.

Brothers' film *Barton Fink*. The posturing of the self-glorifying alcoholic is not something to be cultivated. But there is more to drunkenness than this; there are varieties and styles of drunkenness which avoid the boorish and the sentimental, and somehow contribute to the greatness – the transcendent qualities – of wine itself. So the fact that there is a link between wine and drunkenness does not, of course, mean that *any* kind of drunkenness is acceptable. There are more or less civilised ways of getting drunk. The question for the lover of wine is whether any of them can have any value at all.

In 1723, Edward Curl of the Strand, London, published a book called *Ebrietatis Encomium or The Praise of Drunkenness* by one Boniface Oinophilus di Monte Fiascone. The work had originally appeared in French in 1714 as *L'Éloge de L'Yvresse*, and the real name of its author was Albert-Henri de Sallengre. Sallengre was born in the Hague in 1694, and had studied philosophy and law in Leyden. Despite being a counsellor to the Princess of Nassau, he was an enthusiastic glutton, published a large number of books, and died of syphilis in 1723. The publisher Curl was an equally colourful character: a notorious pornographer, denounced by Defoe for the obscenity of his publications, and eventually taken to court on account of works he published with titles like *Eunuchism Display'd* and *A Treatise on Flogging*.

Yet despite its dubious origins, the *Ebrietatis Encomium* is a humane and instructive work, advocating a style of drinking which is a long way from the slobbish or the self-pitying and self-indulgent. Boniface argues that the art of drunkenness has its own rules or laws, which we should attempt to obey if we are to 'avoid the disorders that drunkenness might cause'.

These are the six rules of drunkenness. (1) *Do not get drunk too often*: Boniface is quick (perhaps too quick) to dismiss those who think that if one gets

drunk once, one will get drunk regularly. (2) The second rule is: *Drink in good company*. ‘That is to say, with good friends, people of wit, honour, and good humour, and where there is good wine’. (Kant, who thought that it was shameful for a man to drink alone, would have agreed.) Boniface perhaps goes too far when he claims that ‘the best wine in the world will taste very bad in bad company’ but we can all appreciate the sentiment. (3) The third rule will not be controversial to readers of this magazine: *drink good wine*. Boniface does not ignore the health-giving properties of wine, noting that bad wine is ‘prejudicial to health’. (4) The fourth rule is that we should drink *at convenient times*: ‘there is a time for all things, and so there is in getting drunk, that is, getting drunk with decency and decorum; and there are some times which are not convenient to do so’. Among the appropriate occasions are when one’s army has won a victory, or when one meets with a friend one has not seen for a long time. It is inappropriate, on the other hand, for a judge to be drunk on the bench, or the parson in his pulpit. (5) The fifth rule that we should *force no one to drink*: this is described as ‘ridiculous and unreasonable: let every man have the liberty to drink as he pleases, without being tied up to the same laws of drinking’. Boniface believes that we should not interfere if someone wishes to drink in their own way; the general principle is: ‘drink, or go about your business’. (6) Few could disagree with the final recommendation: *Not to push drunkenness too far*.

The *Ebrietatis Encomium* does not recommend debauchery or alcoholism; yet it does praise drunkenness and suggests ways in which drunkenness can be best appreciated and enjoyed. It rightly emphasises the pleasure of the *process* of drinking wine over the pleasure of the inevitable *product*. Kingsley Amis put this point well when he said that it was *getting drunk* which was the pleasurable experience; *being drunk*, on the other hand, was a rather unfortunate consequence. Amis finds an

improbable ally here in Roland Barthes: 'other countries drink to get drunk, and this is accepted by everyone; in France, drunkenness is a consequence, never an intention'.⁸

Meanwhile, back in the puritanical and health-obsessed UK, the government recommends that we regulate our drinking by thinking in terms of 'units' of alcohol: men should drink no more than 21 units a week, and women no more than 14. The inescapably dingy terminology can be translated for the contemporary wine drinker as follows: no more than three glasses of wine a day for a man, and one-and-a-third for a woman. (This calculation assumes a glass of 125 ml, and a wine of 12% Alcohol by volume. Those tempted by hot-climate wines of 14% Abv or more, or by larger glasses, are presumably expected to make the appropriate modifications in their intake.)

One thing that provokes the government into making these pronouncements is their anxiety about the distasteful practice of binge-drinking; and here it is hard not to sympathise. Anyone who has been in a provincial English town at 11.30pm on a Friday night will have witnessed the unpleasant spectacle of tanked-up young men (and women) looking for 'action'. Boniface and Barthes would certainly not have approved of this kind of drinking. Politicians and pundits returning from their holidays in the Dordogne wring their hands over why the British cannot drink in the civilised way the French do. It's a good question, but making rules about 'units' is not the answer. For if a Frenchman wanted to enjoy a bottle of wine with his wife every evening, he would have to break the UK government's recommendations, which would only permit 5/9 of a bottle a day between the two of them. Yet surely no sensible person would recommend that French wine-drinkers should conform to this rule.

⁸ Roland Barthes, 'Wine and Milk' in *Mythologies* translated by Annette Lavers, London: Jonathan Cape 1972.

This suggests that the problem which the present UK government is trying to address is not so much the quantity of alcohol consumed, but the way it is done. To a certain extent, it is how you drink, not how much, that matters. One lesson we can take away from our reflections on the history of excess is that excess itself is something with its own norms and principles. We might even say that getting drunk is something that can be done with balance, elegance and finesse. Perhaps Professor Scruton could agree; perhaps, paradoxical as it may seem, excess in wine-drinking is something which can be a valuable experience – even if only in moderation.